DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 330 299 HE 024 420

AUTHOR Grant, Mary Anne
TITLE Studying in the French University: A Guide for U.S. Advisors and Students. Working Paper #16.
INSTITUTION National Association for Foreign Student Affairs, Washington, DC. Field Service Program.
PUB DATE Apr 90
NOTE 13p.
AVAILABLE FROM NAFSA Association of International Educators, 1875 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Suite 1000, Washington, DC 20009-5728 ($2.90 plus postage and handling).
PUB TYPE Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Academic Records; College Environment; College Students; Course Selection (Students); Credits; Cultural Differences; Grading; Higher Education; School Registration; Student College Relationship; *Study Abroad; Teacher Student Relationship; Tests; Transfer Policy
IDENTIFIERS *France

ABSTRACT

This guide is designed for student advisors in the United States who are counseling students preparing for a period of study in a fully integrated higher education program in France. The guide covers aspects of the French educational system including the French higher education system, university and academic life, course selection and credit transfer, registration, student/teacher relationship, examinations, the grading system, and academic records. Major differences between American and French systems of higher education include the following: students need to be more independent under the French system; credit is earned primarily by the final examination at the end of the year; programs of study for degrees are strictly defined; and campus life is less organized. A list of books for further consultation is included. (LPT)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED330299

NAFSA Field Service

Working Paper #16

Studying in the French University:

A Guide for U.S. Advisers and Students

This working paper provides basic information on the French Educational System and is designed for U.S. study abroad advisers counseling students who are interested in enrolling directly into a French university.

The paper was prepared by Mary Anne Grant, Executive Director, International Student Exchange Program, (ISEP).

This information is intended for sharing. Permission to copy the document in full or in part is granted, so long as appropriate credit is given to the author and NAFSA.

Additional copies of this working paper may be obtained from NAFSA, at a cost of **$2.90** to cover duplication and shipping. To order, contact NAFSA Publications Department, 1860 19th St., NW, Washington, DC 20009. All orders must be prepaid.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
NAFSA

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☒ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

STUDYING IN THE FRENCH UNIVERSITY:
A Guide for U.S. Advisers and Students

Mary Anne Grant
Executive Director
International Student Exchange Program

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction 1

Higher Education and University Life 1

Academic Life 2

Course Selection and Credit Transfer 3

Registration 5

Student/Teacher Relationships 6

Examinations 6

Grading System 7

Academic Records 8

Conclusion 9

Bibliography

Appendix: Sample of Academic Records

Introduction

This document is designed for U.S. study abroad advisers and other international education professionals to assist in counseling students preparing for study in France. It is written primarily from the point of view of the student who will enroll directly into a French university with a program of study that will become part of the U.S. undergraduate degree. It is not a comprehensive treatise on the system of education in France; such information is available through other sources, most notably AACRAO's 1988 World Education Series book on France by A. Mariam Assefa.

U.S. students considering a period of study abroad have particular needs and concerns. They need guidance on their target country's educational system in order to have an enjoyable and profitable experience; in many cases, students abruptly confront their own system only upon arrival in their host country as they try to register for classes. Students need to be clear about their point of reference before departure in order to deal with the foreign educational environment.

U.S. students must also know as much as possible about the home institution's policies and requirements for study abroad in order to make the most out of their experience. The following information will assist U.S. advisers and students in forming appropriate questions on the new surroundings and situation.

Higher Education and University Life

Secondary education in France is obligatory to age 16. The high school diploma is known as the baccalauréat and is required for admission to a French university. There are different types of baccalauréat and students must pass a national examination in order to earn the diploma.

In France, there are three major types of higher education institutions:

1. Institut Universitaire de Technologie (IUT): two-year programs for professional preparation

2. Universitaire: comprehensive, autonomous, studies through doctoral level

3. Grande Ecole: entrance is by examination (concours); very competitive; specialized programs of study are offered.

Since most U.S. students enroll in French universities, the information provided here focuses on that sector. University study is divided into three cycles:

1. The première cycle requires two years of study and leads to the Diplôme d'Etudes Universitaires Générales (DEUG) and other Diplômes Universitaires.

2. The deuxième cycle encompasses two degrees: the licence requires a third year beyond the DEUG, and the maîtrise requires two years beyond the DEUG.

3. The troisième cycle is the final stage of university study and consists of various types of advanced degrees including the DESS (Diplôme d'Etudes Supérieures Specialisées), the DEA (Diplôme d'Etudes Approfondies) and the doctorate. (WES, pp. 39-40)

The typical university "campus" in France is quite different from what is commonly found in the United States. In fact, the typical U.S. university campus is rarely found outside the United States. Academic buildings which are considered as the core of the French university are generally located within cities and towns. Student residences and other university facilities are frequently located in different parts of the city. The "campus" is usually comprised of the residence halls, cafeterias and some sports facilities. Such scattered facilities may affect the arrangement of student schedules since it may take some time to get from one location to another. Bus service is provided either by the community or the university usually until about midnight.

Many activities which foster the notion of school spirit and develop a sense of community do not exist in the same way in France as in the United States. French students often seek social life and distractions in the city rather than on the campus, preferring to go to cafés, discos or apartments of friends. It is not unusual for a French student to receive friends in his or her room and to spend the evening talking over cup of coffee or a glass of wine. Since French students often prefer living in apartments in town, rather than in the student residences, U.S. students may find a higher percentage of foreign students than French students in the residence halls.

Academic Life

The structure of degree programs in French universities is very different. Students concentrate their studies in a selected discipline from the first year. General education requirements that are typically part of the U.S. curriculum during the first two years have been completed in secondary school. Degree programs are highly structured with a specific curriculum outlined for each year of study toward the degree. The French

student must earn a specified number of unités de valeur (UV) in order to qualify for a particular degree. Each UV encompasses several courses. This means that there is little flexibility or choice of courses and thus little need for academic advising to guide a student through a study program. U.S. students entering into this system for an academic year, or a semester in some cases, must recognize the differences in order to adapt the French system to their own needs. Rarely do U.S. students follow the entire program for a given year; rather, U.S. students are more likely to choose courses from different programs and years in a sort of "à la carte" system, especially if they plan to fulfill certain home institution requirements while studying abroad.

French universities are divided into facultés, similar to the college or faculty within a U.S. university. (Technically, the faculté is known as Unité de Formation et de Recherche, or UFR.) The faculty usually encompasses several disciplines, such as the Faculté de Lettres, but may be devoted to a single field such as medicine. (WES, p. 38) French students register in one faculty and pursue a highly structured program. Because U.S. students expect to earn credit for the year of study abroad toward the degree at home, their particular program may cross disciplinary lines and thus require registration in more than one faculty. Flexibility is extremely important since it may not be possible to schedule the exact program students seek. French students who are following a prescribed program do not have to worry much about scheduling since classes within their curriculum will not be scheduled at the same time. On the other hand, the U.S. student is likely to run into scheduling difficulties when selecting courses from different departments or faculties.

Note: U.S. students often plan to take courses in French language, either as the primary focus or as a supplement to other academic interests. U.S. students should be aware that French for foreigners is usually taught in an institute affiliated with the university but with a separate financial structure. These institutes, often known as the Centre d'Etudes Françaises, usually offer courses in French culture as well as language. An additional fee is usually required for French-language courses for foreigners. These language courses can be very helpful and well worth the time and relatively low expense. Many language centers offer intensive language courses in the summer prior to the beginning of the academic year, which can be an ideal introduction to life and study in France for U.S. students.

Course Selection and Credit Transfer

In planning a program of study, U.S. students should decide on the preferred program and several alternatives. Students should work closely with faculty and study abroad advisers in planning their program, and understand exactly what is required to

transfer credit back home, e.g., "contact hours," grades, level of courses, etc. Again, it is essential to know the home institution's requirements concerning credit transfer. Institutional policies differ as to how credit will transfer, e.g., whether credit will count toward the major or fulfill general education requirements or electives. Some institutions will give credit for language acquisition even though the student may not have taken specific language courses; such credit is often awarded by examination upon return to the home campus.

Courses in French universities are usually organized as full-year units, although some universities are beginning to modify their calendars in ways similar to the U.S. model with semester breaks. American students wishing to study for only one semester in a French university may have difficulty finding sufficient courses to equal a full-time load. Also, courses seldom begin at mid-year--the normal start-up time for the second semester in the United States. Students should limit their courses to one or two faculties to avoid difficulties in cross-registration. Also by enrolling in a single faculty, U.S. students may find interaction with French students easier by seeing the same group more often rather than in classes with different groups pursuing different degrees with no overlap.

U.S. students should work with home academic advisers before departure to examine course content in order to determine what will transfer, and should be aware that the exact content of a particular course is not likely to duplicate what is done at home. For example, the range of a history course may differ somewhat from a similar course at home. Yet, credit may still be awarded if it is determined that it meets requirements for the course. U.S. students must know how much flexibility is permitted in order to make informed course selections at the host institution.

Basically, there are two types of courses, cours or conférence and travaux dirigés or travaux pratiques. The cours or conférence consists of lectures given by professors or lecturers. It resembles the U.S. lecture course--large in size, lecture format and little class participation or discussion. Lecture classes often require one written paper and one or two exams throughout the year. Lecture courses often have accompanying smaller discussion or working groups known as travaux dirigés (T.D.) or travaux pratiques. They are limited in size and are usually directed by a teaching assistant or junior lecturer much like teaching assistants in the United States. The travaux dirigés give students an opportunity to practice French, participate in discussions and become more familiar with professors and fellow students. Participation and attendance are compulsory, unlike lecture courses where attendance is not required. Students will usually take a

combination of conférences and travaux dirigés.

Since many U.S. students plan to study French language and literature, some comment about study in these fields may be helpful. These courses will not follow the same lines as French courses in the United States. Typical French students pursuing studies for a licence or maîtrise in French will not be taking language courses; rather, their programs will concentrate in French literature or contemporary studies with in-depth text analysis. U.S. students will be in classes with native speakers who have strong reading and writing skills and relatively high sophistication in literature, and so they may feel overwhelmed at first. U.S. students will need time to adjust to the new academic environment.

U.S. students need to be concerned about the number of contact hours and what constitutes a full-time load while they are abroad, because these matters may affect credit transfer and financial aid. Financial aid eligibility is usually based on maintaining full-time status and in earning a full year's credit while abroad. The concern over full-time load and contact hours does not exist in the same way in the French university system. Because French students follow a specified curriculum each year, they do not have to be concerned about whether they are taking a sufficient number of credit hours in a given year.

In awarding credit for a period of study abroad, most U.S. institutions evaluate the number of in-class contact hours to determine how much credit to award; however, some variations may exist--e.g., it may be determined that a course which only met two hours per week is equal to a three-hour course at the home institution because of the amount of work done outside of class. The home institution adviser or faculty member will examine the content of the course as well as contact hours to determine an equivalency in the home institution's system. Regarding content, U.S. students must take care that courses do not duplicate ones already completed at home since double credit will not be awarded.

Registration

U.S. students often complain about French registration procedures which appear unorganized and confused in comparison to the more methodical and centralized U.S. system. (French students find the U.S. system just as confusing; registration, like cafeteria food, may be a universal target for student complaints.) It should be noted once again that because the French student follows a prescribed program, enrollment for specific classes is not required in the same way. Further, since credit is awarded on the basis of the final examination in most cases, class attendance is not as important except in the case of travaux dirigés.

To register for a class, French students attend the first session and sign a class roster. In some cases, the Service de Scolarité in that faculty will also request that students present a list of the courses they are taking. There is no formal add/drop procedure as in the U.S. system. To drop a class, students simply does not show up for the examination and are thus automatically removed from the registration list in most cases.

French universities do not publish a comprehensive schedule of classes. Because French students know which classes they must take, they simply go to their department to find the class listing posted on a bulletin board with the meeting time and place. This means that U.S. students must go to several departments to find out class schedules, then compose their own schedule. Special arrangements may be required to enroll in a cross-section of classes that do not follow a prescribed program. It takes considerable effort to obtain the necessary information and make the French system work in ways it was not designed to do. Determination and persistence will pay off both in terms of making the necessary arrangements for a study program and in giving pride in accomplishing a difficult task.

Student/Teacher Relationships

The student-teacher relationship has changed considerably since the late '60s. Prior to that time, there was very little contact since the professor lectured the class from a platform above the level of the students and did not entertain questions. Today, there is much greater variety and students often have an opportunity to participate in class discussions, particularly through the travaux dirigés. By and large, French professors welcome closer contact with students, but there are those who still adhere to the traditional system and remain aloof.

The concept of regular office hours does not exist in French universities. It may be difficult to find a professor in the office. Professors are generally open to answering questions and discussing problems before or immediately after class. Individual appointments can also be made. Contact with the professors depends largely on the individual student's initiative. U.S. students should talk with their professors and make an effort to get to know them. Students should not expect professors to seek them out nor make special accommodations; independence, initiative and assertiveness are essential qualities for students in the French system.

Examinations

U.S. students will find that there is much less continuous assessment in France than in the United States. Full responsibility for learning the assigned material rests entirely with the students. This means taking the initiative to read material that is only on the "suggested" list as opposed to

limiting study to just specific reading assignments. Unless U.S. students are diligent about their studies throughout the year, they may be surprised by examination questions on material that was only briefly reviewed in class. Examinations are given at the end of the year and are comprehensive. Final grades are determined primarily by exam results. Exams may be oral, written or both.

U.S. students may wonder whether taking final exams is necessary to earn credit for the course. If they decide not to take the final exam, special arrangements must be made with the professor for assessment and for recording the grade. Without taking the final examination, the student's name will not appear on the role and thus there will be no proof that the student actually attended the class or earned a grade. It is very difficult, if not impossible, to return to a professor to ask for an assessment if there is no final exam grade. Further, larger lecture classes with few if any written assignments may mean that individual students are unknown to the professor. The home institution's policy on final exams should be known by students; in some cases, U.S. institutions will only award transfer credit if there is a final exam grade; for other institutions, an appropriate substitute may be acceptable but must be arranged by students.

Grading System

The French grading system is built on the notion of perfection. By U.S. standards, it is very harsh. The grading scale is usually 0 to 20, with any grade of 10 or above considered passing. French students are generally much less concerned about particular grades than U.S. students; the goal is to pass their classes with an average grade of 10 so they can advance or graduate. U.S. students may be shocked to receive very low grades on their first assignments or tests. They will improve, however, with hard work and greater familiarity with the system.

The grading scale for French students is as follows:

French Grades	Mention	U.S. Equivalents
16-20	très bien	A+
14-15	bien	A
12-13	assez bien	B
10-11	passable	C
8- 9	-------	*
0- 7	ajourné	F

*regarded as passing if entire year was passed (WES, pp. 42-43)

The "mentions" are quality assessments: très bien--very good; bien--good; assez bien--good enough; passable--satisfactory; ajourne--failed. Grades above 16 are very rare. For example, one institution reports that grades of 14-15 are achieved by

approximately 4-5 percent, only 15 percent earn 12-13, and the overall average at this particular university is about 8.5 out of 20. These averages are typical of universities throughout France.

The most problematic area for U.S. students is the passing mark. Interpretations differ among universities in the United States as to what grade is considered passing. Some will award credit for grades of 8 or above; others will not consider anything below 10 as acceptable. In any case, the grading system in France should be taken into account in awarding credit. U.S. advisers should not interpret 10 as a 50 percent mark, equivalent to a failing grade in the United States.

Another important aspect for U.S. students is how grades will be recorded on the home transcript. Here again, U.S. institutional policies differ. A greater percentage of U.S. institutions simply give credit for work done while abroad; others will record the actual grade. Some will give the students a choice as to whether the grade is recorded or simple credit given. Advisers are urged to consult Transcripts from Study Abroad Programs edited by Krawutschke and Roberts for further information.

Academic Records

French universities maintain records for degree students. Official certificates are awarded upon the completion of each stage in the program of study; substitute forms called attestations may be obtained before the formal certificate is available. It is suggested that special arrangements be made for U.S. students in France for a single academic year. Some French universities have developed special "transcripts" for U.S. exchange students to report work they have completed. (See Appendix for a sample of academic records for students participating in the International Student Exchange Program (ISEP).) These special academic records contain more information than is normally found on the French university record.

Conclusion

To sum up, U.S. students will find the following major differences between higher education in the United States and France:

1. The French system requires that students be more independent; there is much less continuous assessment and oversight by the instructor.

2. Credit is earned primarily by the final examination at the end of the year.

3. Programs of study for degrees are strictly defined.

4. In France, students concentrate their studies in a much more narrow subject area.

5. There is less teacher/student contact.

6. Courses usually run full-year rather than one semester or quarter.

7. Campus life is less organized.

8. Grades are based primarily on end-of-year examinations.

####

April 1990

Bibliography
Advisers and students are urged to consult other resources for more detailed and in-depth information.

Assefa, A. Mariam. France: A Study of the Educational System of France and a Guide to the Academic Placement of Students in Educational Institutions of the United States. World Education Series. American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, Washington, DC, 1988.

Krawutschke, Eleanor and Thomas Roberts. Transcripts from Study Abroad Programs, A Workbook. National Association for Foreign Student Affairs, Washington, DC, 1986.

Participant Handbooks produced respectively by the University of Kansas Study Abroad Office (203 Lippincott Hall, University of Kansas, Lawrence, Kansas 66045) and the International Student Exchange Program (ISEP, 1242 35th Street, N.W., Washington, DC 20057).